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A
S E R M O N,
PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,
AT ST. MARY'S,
ON FRIDAY, APRIL 19, 1793.

Being the Day appointed for
A GENERAL FAST.

BY RALPH CHURTON, M.A.
FELLOW OF BRASEN NOSE COLLEGE,
AND RECTOR OF MIDDLETON CHENEY IN NORTHAMPTONSHIRE.

OXFORD:
PRINTED FOR J. FLETCHER, IN THE TURLE;
AND B. AND J. WHITE, LONDON.

M.DCC.XCIII.

MEMORANDUM

PRESENTED BEFORE THE

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

AT ST. MARY'S

IMPRIMATUR,

JOHAN. WILLS,

VICE-CAN.
WADH. COLL. Mail 8, 1793.

BY RALPH CHURTON M.A.

ELLOW OF BRISTOL COLLEGE

AND RECTOR OF ST. MARY'S CHURCH IN NORTHAMPTONSHIRE.

OXFORD.

PRINTED FOR J. BENTLEY IN THE GREAT

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ADVERTISEMENT.

WHEN the following pages were composed, at a short notice, the writer was far from having any other views than to satisfy, to the best of his feeble powers, the duties of the day. But having been requested to publish the discourse by some who heard it delivered and others who have perused it since, it is now printed in conformity with their wishes; which he will be happy in having complied with, if what is here offered shall, by His blessing from whom all good proceeds, be the means of repressing one evil propensity, or strengthening one virtuous habit; especially in the University of Oxford, which, after a residence of twenty one years, the writer is about to quit with sentiments of devout esteem and unalienable attachment.

May 14, 1793.

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1755

LUKE XIII. 2, 3.

SUPPOSE YE THAT THESE GALILEANS WERE SINNERS ABOVE ALL THE GALILEANS, BECAUSE THEY SUFFERED SUCH THINGS? I TELL YOU, NAY: BUT EXCEPT YE REPENT, YE SHALL ALL LIKEWISE PERISH.

ALL suffering is the consequence of sin. Revelation, which teaches this, supplying at the same time certain necessary limitations of the important truth, suggests caution and candour in the use and application of it. In the day of trial and adversity, the patient himself, if he examines his heart with honest impartiality, will seldom be at a loss to discover the intent of his affliction. He will see what course of wickedness, what crime of a deep dye, calls aloud for repentance and reformation; what infirmity requires to be corrected; or what feeble habit demands aid and improvement. To Him therefore the language of departing sorrow will be, sometimes, we humbly trust, accents of joy, "Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace*."

* Luke vii. 50.

but often doubtless the voice of warning, "Behold, thou art made whole; sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee^b."

But what conscious guilt, when roused by calamity, may lay to the charge of the offender, the fallible bystander may not certainly know. It behoves him therefore not to adopt the rash accusation of the barbarians of Melita against St. Paul, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom vengeance suffereth not to live^c;" but rather to cherish those sentiments of mercy, which being often most just should always be presumed so until Charity herself, which "hopeth all things^d," is compelled to think otherwise: "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents, that he was born blind^e." "Whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth^f." The Galileans, whose blood Pilate shed at the time they were attending the duties of religion, were not sinners above others their countrymen, who did not perish by any similar deed of impiety and violence; nor were those on whom the tower in Siloam fell and slew them more guilty and obnoxious in the sight of God, than many contemporary inhabitants of Jerusalem, whose end was marked with no such catastrophe. In the evils and calamities of this life, espe-

^b John v. 14.

^c John ix. 2, 3.

^d Acts xxviii. 4.

^e Heb. xiii. 12.

^f 1 Cor. xiii. 7.

cially in public calamities, in pestilential seasons, in storms and tempests, in the devastations of war, though all is disposed by the rules of infinite wisdom and goodness, yet one common destruction often involves the good and the bad, and "no man knoweth either love or hatred," the Almighty's love of virtue or abhorrence of vice, "by all that is before them," a prosperous estate being no sure criterion of God's favour, adversity no infallible sign of his displeasure; for that "all things come alike to all," and "there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked."

Still however the general truth, that misery is the fruit and consequence of sin, remains fixed and immoveable; attested by God's word, and confirmed by his Providence. Peace of mind, health of body, length of days, riches and honour, are the natural effects and produce of temperance and virtue; and, on the contrary, anguish of soul and bodily disease, ruin of fortune and loss of friends, disesteem and death, are the genuine offspring and wages of sin. While man was innocent, pain was unknown; and when the vanquished grave shall give back his prisoners, rescued from corruption, and invested with "the liberty of the children of God," sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

If these remarks require exception or limitation as to what was said of the general tenour of events happening

* Ecclef. ix. 1, 2.

* Rom. viii. 21.

alike to all, it seems to be in the case of civil states and kingdoms. All relations of this sort being confined to the present world, it may be thought probable, that the distributions of Providence here run in what may be styled a more equal course; and that national prosperity holds exact proportion with national merit, and national suffering with public guilt. To one part of this proposition we may safely subscribe; the other, I fear, must be admitted with caution. Towards kingdoms, as well as towards individuals, the Lord is long-suffering and gracious, and spareth when they deserve punishment. As he bore with the world before the flood¹; and with the Jews forty years, so may he in modern days: therefore exemption from the rod will not necessarily infer exemption from guilt. But when his holy arm is lifted up to smite, when his judgements are abroad in the earth, there is doubtless just cause for his anger; for he doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men.

We are now conflicting with one of those calamities, which He who ruleth in the kingdoms of the world is wont to challenge as an evil peculiarly of His sending: the sword of war is unsheathed against us. How shall we ward off the alarming conclusion, Therefore there is among us the accursed thing?

¹ 1 Pet. iii. 20.

Shall

Shall we say, that our cause is good ; that we fight not but to redress the injured, to chastise iniquity that cries aloud for vengeance ? When the matter concerns ourselves, we are not always the best judges of equity ; but be it so, that these pleas are ever so well founded ; be they, as we humbly trust they are, just in the sight of God, as well as of men : still it may be asked, Will they fully avail us in the present instance ? For do we then go forth like the Israelites of old, commissioned by Heaven to cut off a people devoted to destruction, whom the very earth abominated ? Do we, like them, fight the Lord's battles, protected by his shield ; so that when thousands have fallen before us, when we muster our own forces, not one man lacketh* ? If it is false to assert this, and madness to expect it, we must allow war in its mildest aspect and least ghastly form to be a terror, a plague, and a curse. It impedes the social intercourse of the world ; it exhausts the treasures that might be employed in deeds of beneficence and the arts of peace, and calls forth the widow's lamentation and the tears of the orphan. And if war is an evil, a public evil, the conclusion recoils upon us, There is therefore public guilt. And it is of small moment to compare ourselves with others whose crimes are more gigantic and heinous, while it may be said, Thou thyself art sinful : nor do we judge wisely, if we make light of the smallest

* Numb. xxxi. 49.

portion of That for which the Son of God shed his blood upon the cross; which is the source of all the miseries of this life; and of which a single act, unrepented of, will for ever exclude us from the sight of God and the kingdom of heaven.

Warned as we are not only by the permanent admonitions of the gospel, but now also by the example and command of a Sovereign ever anxious for the welfare of all his subjects, let each of us sincerely bewail and reform the sins of which his own breast is conscious; lest they should be the private but malignant stain of the land, that may hinder success, or retard peace. As to public offences and notorious deviations from what is right, these, if such there be, are within the province of the preacher; nor is he faithful to his Lord or a true friend to his country, however humble his abilities, who, when he is thus commissioned, shall shrink from his charge; shall hesitate to shew even Israel his transgressions, and the house of Judah their sins. And it were well if there were not something of this nature which hasty observation may discover, and a rapid discourse exhibit; if there were not in our good qualities somewhat to correct, and in our ill habits much to amend.

Humanity, that generous virtue, denominated from man, is almost another name for a Briton; and would God it might

might increase a hundred-fold, and that the Lord would pour forth abundantly the spirit of charity in our hearts. But is this our boasted excellence always what it seems to be? Do we never mistake, dazzled by its lustre, the false gem for the brilliant, the counterfeit for true coin, the shadow for the substance? Blessed ourselves with liberty, and sensible of the blessing, we shudder at the thought that slavery should exist in any corner of the earth; we shrink at the recital of barbarity to Negroes; we are filled with horror to hear of cruelty even to brutes. But is then the heart, thus tremblingly alive to distant sorrows, always equally touched with nearer woes? equally solicitous to relieve want and alleviate misery lying at the door? Is not the same person, who sympathizes so feelingly with Transatlantic sufferings, often seen "as a lion in his house, and "frantic among his servants?" And does not then his fancied virtue too nearly resemble the generosity of the king of beasts to his vanquished foe, joined with the ferocity of the same lordly animal to those that provoke him? In all such cases we may surely apply the reasoning of the apostle: "He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how "can he love his brother whom he hath not seen?" If we do not shew kindness, do not exercise forbearance, towards all men with whom we have dealings, it is extremely

¹ Eccles. iv. 30. ² John iv. 20.

impro-

improbable that our demeanour would be more gentle, our charity more exuberant, towards those, were they placed within our reach, whose forlorn situation and accumulated griefs, when reported in our hearing, move the sigh of sensibility and the tear of compassion. And in general it may be regarded as a kind of moral axiom, that if we do not perform our duty in our present station, whatever it be, neither should we perform it in any other station which a fond imagination may paint, and restless desire may covet.

The homage paid to this semblance of humanity seems to have confounded our notions, and perverted our language; and we sometimes hear it said of a person, as the sum of his merit, that he has *a good heart*. The only good heart that religion knows, or reason can approve, is that, which, fully sensible of its own sinfulness, relies humbly on God's mercy, and confides in his strength; and from the good treasures of such a heart will proceed answerable conduct, love to God and obedience to his laws, and universal good-will and charity to men. But in the style of fashionable folly and culpable complaisance, the man who has a good heart, may yet, did not human laws restrain overt acts of violence, live in the habitual transgression of every precept of both tables of the decalogue.

If our ideas want accuracy and our expressions correctness,

ness, and our best qualities will scarcely bear the test of Christian candour, much less of rigid justice; how shall we excuse omissions of duty? how shall we atone for positive delinquency? The neglect, not to say contempt, of religious ordinances, and particularly of the day peculiarly set apart for God's honour and service, is too visible to escape notice, and too shameful to be palliated. Styling ourselves Protestants and members of a church which those best able to judge, with reason esteem the purest in Christendom, we forget that superior light and more exalted privileges, when they are abused or disregarded, do but aggravate our guilt and will enhance our punishment.

In the supineness or absence of the religious principle to direct and invigorate, Honour predominates; a term which, in popular use, at best includes no other virtues but veracity and courage, and may consist with the indulgence of almost every vice. Hence God's holy name is profaned with horrid oaths; hence intemperance and debauchery; hence murder, suicide, lewdness, and adultery; and these so frequent, and so shameless, as if we were resolved to see how long it will be, ere the Lord, awaking as one out of sleep, crieth out, "Shall not I visit for these things? and shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?"

* Jer. v. 9.

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We convert our prosperity into our ruin. While riches flow in upon us, we lavish them in luxury, and sacrifice them to pleasure. Impoverished or straitened by these means, we seek to amass treasures by hasty strides and iniquitous practices; and, to complete our folly, in the midst of our extravagance complain of public burdens and oppressive taxes. It may perhaps well be questioned, whether, from the advantages with which it has pleased God to bless us, in the increase of wealth, the improvement of manufactures, and the extension of commerce, we are not, as a nation, in a condition altogether as easy and enviable, as we were before that unfortunate accumulation of debt, which is the subject of murmuring. But admit it to be otherwise; say that the weight, augmented as our resources are, is ten times more heavy to bear now than heretofore; it is surely a principle of common equity that just debts, public as well as private, must be paid: and I know of no hardship that is rendered more supportable by fretful complaining.

But these remarks possibly, before the present audience, may be deemed less pertinent or necessary. Secluded from the world in this our Athens, or, to use a better allusion, in these schools of the prophets, we have escaped the grosser corruptions of public life, the turbulent passions, and "the swelling of Jordan." Whatever crimes, whatever fail-

ings, we are happily exempt from, to God be the praise through Jesus Christ. But, alas! whether in the crowded emporium or sequestered vale or cloistered college, wherever man is, there is imbecility and sin; the absence of much attainable good, the presence of much evil that might have been avoided.

Besides, is it certain that we have so entirely shut out the world and its vices? Has it not been suffered to break in upon our retirement, to our imminent danger? Perhaps human ingenuity cannot apportion time more commodiously to serve the common and inseparable interest of religion and learning, than in the customary distribution and order of collegiate hours; where temperate refreshment, cheerful society, and salutary exercise have their just and stated seasons; where devotion has her homage, and literature her attendance, at proper intervals, through the whole day. But if, in conforming to fashionable hours, we have permitted them to be followed by those inconveniences which do not attend them in the world, though, if they did, they would there be less reprehensible; if in any instances on six days out of seven, or if on one day out of six (for I will not suppose Sunday to be so abused), four or five hours are devoted, I will not say to intemperance, I will not say to games of chance, both which however and worse consequences must ensue, should it become a prevalent custom; if four or five

successive hours are given, not by accident or upon some extraordinary occasion, but regularly and systematically, merely to social conversation, it is a grievous waste of that precious time, which is registered in heaven, for every moment of which an account must be rendered at the tribunal of Christ. But leaving this high consideration with humble sincerity to the consciences of those whom it may concern, if any such hear me, suffer me to say, that whoever or whatever takes from the student the academic evening, robs him of hours which those who have experienced, men of the first talents and profound erudition, have always found and describe as among the moments most favourable to study and propitious to genius, alike calculated for cultivating science, or for soliciting the muse.

It may seem perhaps beneath the dignity of this place and occasion to caution the younger part of my hearers against a querulous censorious disposition, a fondness for satire, and delight in caricature. Yet in truth these things are the seeds of mischief, which, if suffered to take root or not carefully extirpated from the juvenile mind, will prevent the growth of better fruits. He who is accustomed to look at the worst side of things, who is on the watch for blemishes, and habituated to ridicule, will soon become offensive to others and dissatisfied with himself: by attending to foibles he will lose the relish for great excellence;

and

and miss substantial comforts by being disconcerted and uneasy at trifles. Perfection belongs not to human operations; and there is much truth in the trite observation, that it is an easy matter to find out faults. It is a mark of higher genius and superior discernment to discover and elucidate genuine beauties and true sublimity: the mind therefore should be strengthened and enlarged by being inured to works of sterling merit; by contemplating with admiration, in literature and in life, in religion and in government, those exalted graces, those pre-eminent virtues, that have commanded the applause of successive generations.

In a neighbouring kingdom, now, alas! no longer a kingdom, nor even a state, it is said that one of the earliest preludes, one of the first symptoms, of that total subversion of government, that universal distraction of order, and those enormous crimes, which astonish and appal the civilized world, was the want of subordination, the impatience of discipline, in the seminaries of learning. If there is the remotest Tendency to similar passions in our own country and among ourselves, we should crush the growing evil in the bud; we should recommend by our example, and enforce by our authority, habits of sobriety, of decency, of order. Let the governors therefore exercise meekness, discretion, vigilance, clemency; let the governed shew reverence, submission, and affection; let all promote harmony

mony and good-will; let all advance charity, all study peace.

We glory in our constitution, the envy of the world; we are immoveably attached to monarchy, firm friends to the church. Doubtless, in subordination to that principle which should direct and animate all other duties, we cannot love them with sincerity and with ardour more than they deserve. But in mere forms, however excellent, let no man henceforth put confidence; henceforward let no man rely on the arm of flesh. Where are now those deep schemes of a Mazarine and a Richlieu, contrived with unparalleled ability and executed with consummate address? Where is the sceptre, caressed and adored by those who smarted under it, that was to hold its vassals in perpetual subjugation? Where is that mighty fabric of government, the work of ages, and tremendous in the eyes of all Europe? It is gone, almost without an effort to save it, gone in a moment, like a dream or a shadow, as the morning cloud or the early dew. In the place of it and on its ruins has started up the giant form of Anarchy, whose smiles are treason, whose frown is death. He tramples on religion; and speaks blasphemy against God; he spurns at liberty; insults justice, nor is sated with blood till the unresisting Sovereign lies prostrate and slain at his feet.

It

It was impossible that neighbouring nations should not early take alarm at such scenes of uproar. To restrain daring licentiousness ere it should accomplish its utmost fury, to check wild ambition aiming to unbinge all civil government, well appointed armies, under commanders of tried skill and prowess, marched forth against troops of murderers and legions of sedition. The event, however, did not answer their splendid preparations and fair hopes; they were compelled to retreat with discomfiture and disgrace. How shall we account for it? Surely in this manner. He who dwelleth in heaven, and beholdeth all the inhabitants of the earth, has a right to judge not only of the merits of the cause, but of the demerits of the persons concerned in it; and often punishes first of all the wickedness of those whom finally he purposes to employ as instruments of his vengeance against blacker guilt and more atrocious enormities. When the tribes of Israel, asking council of God, went up against Benjamin for refusing to deliver up the men of Gibeah who had committed horrid abomination, they were twice smitten down before them; and there fell of the Israelites forty thousand men. The surviving multitude and all Israel assembled before the Lord, and fasted, and wept; whereupon they received a promise of victory; and now, in the third encounter, the offending tribe was given up to their sword^p. The cases appear

^p See Judges xx.

parallel in their commencement and outset; may the present contest be similar in its issue, but, if it please God, with speedier termination. It will be similar, if the repentance of those interested is equally sincere and exemplary.

Recent successes, and present appearances, with the accession of new allies to strengthen the confederacy, may be regarded as auspicious omens, and afford room for favourable conjectures and hopes. But still the battle is the Lord's; and the caution is never unwise or unseasonable, "Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off".

Newly involved in the dispute ourselves, and defended as we are by our happy situation, the waters being a wall unto us on the right hand and on the left, war at best is what we should deplore and deprecate. If the generous blood of one of our countrymen is shed in the struggle, it is a fore evil. We have before had trials, many and remarkable, at home and abroad. We have experienced protection, we have found deliverance, we enjoy privileges without number and above price. Let us not, by despising the present warning, risk the continuance of that favour, which is life and happiness. If we would derive a blessing on

^a 1 Kings xx. 11.

^c Exod. xiv. 22.

the cause we are embarked in, if we would save and adorn our country which we love, if we would preserve our immortal souls, let us not fast for strife and debate, for ostentation and pride; but let us, with unfeigned sorrow for past offences, and with steady resolution to cleave unto the Lord, put away our sins. "When the host goeth forth
"against thine enemies, then keep thee from every wicked
"thing."

* Deut. xxiii. 9.

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F I N I S .